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SUBJECT: FORMER PARLIAMENT SPEAKER CRITICIZES GOJ'S
HANDLING OF IRAQ WAR PUBLIC RELATIONS, PRAISES ABU MAZEN

REF: AMMAN 1954

Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman for reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

1. (S) In a lengthy conversation April 8, former Parliament Speaker Abdul Hadi al-Majali (please protect throughout) told PolCouns that King Abdullah and Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb have mis-handled their public approach to the war in Iraq. Majali said that the King and PM have "only an economic cabinet," the members of which have no political credibility or tribal connections with most Jordanians. "All the ministers," he argued, "should be out in villages and towns explaining what Jordan is doing in the war and why." However, he argued, "the King's economic technocrats" do not have the political background, popular touch -- or mandate from the King or PM -- to explain the government's political policy.

2. (S) Majali reluctantly admitted that the current GOJ had done a good job of preparing Jordan economically for war: there were no fuel or food shortages, no price hikes, no run on the dinar or mass layoffs at QIZ factories. Nonetheless, he said, the average Jordanian "doesn't care about this economic stuff" when faced with a "huge injustice" like the Iraq war. It is the moral and political issues of the war that will be remembered.

3. (S) The solution to the government's weak handling of politics, he proposed, would have been for the King to appoint a new "political" government two or three months before the start of the war. The members of this government should have been political figures (like Majali) who had "a good tribal base" in either the East Bank or Palestinian communities. This kind of minister, Majali asserted, would have been able to "stand in the center of Irbid or Mafraq and explain where Jordan's interests lie."

OPEN LETTER TO THE KING OPENS THE POLITICAL PROCESS

4. (S) Majali proudly noted that he was one of the signatories of the March 31 open letter to King Abdullah (ref) which criticized GOJ Iraq policy. He said that he and many of the prominent signatories had signed the letter to "open the political process" and let the King know they were unhappy with the way things were going in Iraq. "Without a sitting Parliament," he argued, "we had no other choice but to open a political discussion of the issue." He confided later in the conversation that "the King never talks to us" (former senior government officials and politicians). It was only after the letter was published, he asserted, that the PM agreed to meet with a group of former PMs to talk about Iraq, a request that had been made weeks before.

DELAY THE ELECTIONS UNTIL PEOPLE FORGET IRAQ

5. (S) Majali (echoing a sentiment we have heard from many in the political class, see septel) lamented the King's decision to hold Parliamentary elections on June 17. "No one wants to hear about elections now; they are all thinking about TV pictures of dead Iraqis." Majali fears that "good, pro-Jordan" candidates (i.e. not from the Islamic Action Front) will have trouble campaigning on local issues while their constituents still have war in Iraq "fresh on their minds." "I and other pro-Jordan candidates will have to attack the U.S. and the government" to keep pace with the shallow but popular anti-war, anti-U.S., and anti-Israel rhetoric already coming from Islamist candidates. The King, he concluded, should postpone elections at least into the fall so Jordanians have a chance to "calm down" before they vote.

ABU MAZEN IS THE RIGHT MAN FOR PALESTINE

6. (S) Majali was very pleased with the appointment of Abu Mazen as the new Palestinian Prime Minister. Abu Mazen, he said, should be able to talk to both average Palestinians, and to Israelis -- something Arafat was never able to do. He

urged the U.S. to support Abu Mazen, and to press Israeli to support him as well. Majali, however, expressed great pessimism about the ability of the Sharon government to offer a viable deal to Palestinians. "I fear (Sharon) will only delay, build more settlements and demolish more houses, until the roadmap is meaningless."

COMMENT

17. (S) Much of Majali's monologue is self-serving political rhetoric from an aging politician who was close to King Hussein, but has been sidelined by the younger, economic-focused coterie around King Abdullah. Nonetheless, his basic point -- that the King and PM have focused on the economic consequences of the war but have not addressed the political with the same attention -- has a large measure of truth to it.
GNEHM